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Hungary

According to the most recent census, there are some 10,013,628 people living in Hungary. The majority of the population, 92.3%, are Hungarians. The largest minority is Romani, with some 205,720 inhabitants, or about 2% of the total population. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) claim, however, that the real number might be twice as high.

Situation of the Romani population

The largest proportion of the Romani population was recorded in the northeast, in the Borsod-Abaúj-Zemplén district on the Slovakian border and Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg on the border to Ukraine. In these areas, the proportion of Roma over the long term is about 7%. Other districts with sizeable representations of Romani include Somogy, Baranya and Tolna on the Croatian border, where the Romani population is estimated at about 5 - 6%.

Discrimination is prohibited by the Hungarian constitution. In the past few years Hungary has signed a number of international agreements that secure the rights of minorities and prohibit discrimination based on ethnic origin. Since 1995, members of ethnic minorities in Hungary can also consult an ombudsman. Currently Hungary is taking part in the "Decade of Roma Inclusion: 2005-2015" initiative, along with Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Macedonia, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Spain. The objective is to improve living conditions for Roma in eastern and central European countries and facilitate better integration into the social majority, focusing particularly on education, jobs, housing and health care. Experts report regularly on the extent to which obligations are met in each country. The third and most recent Decade Watch Report, from 2009, determined that in comparison to the previous years no progress was noted in the integration of Roma in Hungary.

As in other countries, primarily in eastern Europe, the Roma in Hungary are among the poorest and least developed group in the population, and thus are forced to live on the margins of society. In addition to social exclusion, the Romani in Hungary are also faced with rising levels of violence, frequently in the form of organized attacks that sometimes result in deaths. The reaction of the state is often restrained and not particularly effective.

The situation is expected to deteriorate further in connection with the 2010 elections. For the past 8 years the "Hungarian Socialist Party" (MSZP) has been running the country. In the April 2010 elections, however, the right-leaning "Fidesz" party headed up by Viktor Orbán was the clear winner, and now has 263 seats in parliament. Particularly worrying is the rapid rise of the radical right-wing party, "Jobbik," led by Gabor Vona. One of their campaign slogans was "The solution to Gypsy criminality." The party purposely exploited the "anti-Gypsy" sentiment that is on the rise in Hungarian society. Many Hungarians think of Romani as lazy criminals who live on government aid, at the expense of honest, working citizens.

The campaigns leading up to the elections did not shy away from racist remarks. Jobbik prepared a video for the campaign called "Getting rid of the parasites." The video shows a young woman saying that she is afraid to go outside at night because of Romani criminals. Hungarian public television initially refused to broadcast the clips because it fueled hatred of the Roma. But the supreme court ruled that all political parties must be allowed the same amount of time in the media during the pre-election campaign, and that the media are not responsible for the content of the campaign advertisements.

The Jobbik party had already drawn similar attention to itself in 2006 when it organized violent anti-government demonstrations, and again in August 2007 when it founded the "Hungarian Guard," which publicly identified itself with fascist ideals. The "Hungarian Guard" was officially outlawed in 2009, but continues its activities illegally.

After the 2009 European elections, the "Magyar Szocialista Párt / MSZP" (4 seats) and "Fidesz" (14 seats) entered the European Parliament. Lívia Járóka (Fidesz party) is particularly active for the rights of Romanis. She has taken on the task of helping the Roma find their place in Europe. The Jobbik party had a sensational success, joining the European Parliament with three seats. Thus the growing popularity of this party in Hungary could jeopardize democratic development throughout the EU.

Education

In Hungary, as in other countries in the region, Romani children are placed in special schools for children with learning disabilities or mental handicaps. In fact, Romani children make up 90% of the students in these schools. The demands placed on the pupils at these schools are very low, so that after graduating they are 2 to 3 years behind the educational level of those educated in classic schools.

According to a study from 2003, some 10% of Roma children do not even finish primary school. Another 10% stop at the end of primary school, and of those who continue, the majority go to vocational schools or the like, which do not offer a path to university entrance.

Job market

Education is closely linked to work. Currently the financial crisis Hungary has reached a high point and unemployment among Roma is 75%. Romanis make up half of the poorest part of the population in Hungary, for the most part due to lack of education. Many of them work in the construction industry, which according to the latest figures has declined by 50% and is laying off its least qualified workers.

According to the EU-MIDIS, a study by the agency of the European Union for basic rights concerning discrimination of minorities in EU countries, roughly one in three Roma suffers from discrimination, either at work or in seeking work, due to their ethnicity. Although Hungarian law prohibits discrimination based on ethnic origin and provides for punishments, the ombudsman has registered a number of complaints. Prejudices and negative attitudes among the social majority against Roma play no small part in the problem. Hungary is working on state training programs intended to make it easier for Romanis to enter the job market. The programs are not specifically geared toward Romanis; rather, the long-term unemployed and socially disadvantaged benefit from them regardless of their ethnicity. This makes it difficult to measure the extent to which the programs are helping Romanis.

Housing market

The situation in the housing market is not much better. According to the Hungarian government, some 100,000 people live in shack-like dwellings, primarily in the country or on the periphery of large cities. The majority of those affected are Roma. According to a report by the European Roma Rights Center (ERRC) there are no drainage systems in these settlements, no trash collection service, no buses, and no emergency doctor. Many homes have no electricity, gas or drinking water. Under these living conditions and low hygiene standards, rapidly spreading diseases and epidemics loom. Not only the price of rents and other living costs make it difficult to find a normal apartment, but also the hostility of others. In a survey, 92% of respondents said they did not want to have Roma as neighbors. This rejection reinforces the isolation of the Romanis.

Resentments against the Romani people

Roma are consciously despised by the majority population and pushed to the edge of society. This has been confirmed by long-term studies. Survey results show that Roma are the most hated minority in Hungary. Hidden anti-Roma attitudes are becoming more open and increasingly being expressed in direct attacks. In the past three years, 11 Romanis in Hungary have been killed in attacks on their homes. In most cases, the perpetrators have not been found. Representatives of the Romani Initiative assert that these acts have a racist background.

Proposed solutions:

The laws against discrimination and racism must be made stricter, and racism in all its forms must be consistently punished. Above all, the government should introduce programs in schools and other social institutions to generally promote acceptance of Romani and other minorities. Furthermore, positive representations in media must be actively sought to counter the prejudices against Romanis and improve co-existence with the social majority. Otherwise, there is a risk that incidents of violence will develop into widespread ethnic conflicts.

The government should set itself the goal of having the highest possible proportion of Romani children in the normal schools. To better prepare them for the education system, it might be helpful to integrate more Romani children into pre-school facilities. For example, the last year of pre-school could be offered free of charge and made compulsory. This way, even the children who do not receive optimal parental care would be better able to integrate themselves into school classes. Schools could also draw on European funding to support equal opportunities in access to education. Consciousness-raising among the Hungarian majority is very important in this context, because many parents do not want to send their children to school with Romani children.

All in all, the fight against discrimination in all areas of public life must be made a high priority. The state should introduce more adult-education programs for Romani, better controls in the workplace especially with regard to hiring policies, more infrastructure projects in Romani settlements and, as far as possible, more inclusion of Romani in health care services.